



British flagship: launched in 1924, the British Aviator was the 60th member of the APOC fleet and the most powerful single-screw motor ship in the world.



Report> Ian Valentine
Photography> BP Archive / Barry Halton / Stuart Conway

BP's shipping business is almost as old as the company itself, with its first ship delivered in 1916. Since then, its fleet has navigated oceans, politics and economics, all with a steady hand and a determination to be a leading force in the transportation industry.

TAKE A BOW

A CENTURY OF SUCCESS ON THE OCEANS



Launch party: the British Premier was launched at Jarrow on Tyne on 25th August 1922 (top). Middle, the *British Victory* leaves the fitting-out wharf, and right, *British Fame*, *Merlin* and *Reliance* in the ice channel into the port of Stockholm, Sweden, during severe weather conditions.



Looking back across the economic, political and military struggles that rocked Europe and the Middle East in the 20th century, it is hard to believe that a shipping company could have delivered crude oil uninterrupted in that arena for the past 95 years. Yet BP Shipping has not only navigated the choppy waters of change, but has motored into the new millennium as a leading force in the global oil transportation industry.

The maritime arm of BP can trace its roots back to the early days of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), the precursor to today's BP. As soon as oil had been struck in Persia, now Iran, the need to ship it back to Britain arose. This was primarily undertaken by contractors, until one of the directors of APOC, a visionary Scotsman named Sir Charles Greenway, saw that a modern petrochemicals business ought to be vertically integrated: able to find, extract, refine and market the oil itself. In 1915, the British Tanker Company Limited (BTC) was formed with a budget of \$144,000 to build seven steam-powered tankers. All those ships and later additions to the fleet would bear the prefix 'British'.

Over the next decade, as the need for oil in the developed world gathered pace, the BTC grew to meet this demand. By just 1924, the fleet numbered 60, with the 60th being the flagship, 10,762 deadweight tonnes (dwt), *British Aviator*. It was APOC's first diesel engine oil tanker, the most powerful single-screw motor ship in the world.

Weathering the storm

The good times were about to end, however, with the onset of the Great Depression in the early 1930s. Rising unemployment within the merchant navy meant it was not unknown for fully qualified masters to take jobs as deck hands, while work was scarce for apprentices and cadet officers. But, through a policy of strategic mergers, as well as the continued support of the Shah of Iran, APOC weathered the storm, strengthening its position within the industry.

In 1939, the British government chartered the whole fleet of 93 vessels to supply fuel for its forces during the Second World War. "Our seamen were just doing

their jobs, which they delivered with great ability under severe pressure,” says Dave Williamson, vice president for Fleet Operations, who arrived at the company as a cadet 37 years ago.

Within a year of peace in 1945, the BTC fleet had returned to its pre-war total of 93 ships. The recovery was further bolstered by an order for 57 new tankers, each 12,000 dwt, which would increase the tonnage of oil transported from Abadan refinery in Iran, but remain light enough for the tankers to pass through the shallow waters of the Suez Canal.

Lessons learnt

In 1951, however, this arrangement was changed by the nationalisation of the Iranian oil industry. APOC removed its staff from the country. This sudden shortage left it over a barrel, and although oil would again flow west from the Iranian oil fields, the lessons were quickly learnt.

The newly-renamed British Petroleum Company duly recognised the need to widen its network of suppliers and refineries, in particular forging alliances with Kuwait and Bahrain. In the early 1950s, it also increased the size of deep-sea ships, building 13 so-called supertankers at more than 30,000 dwt. These bigger ships were particularly useful in 1956, when the first Suez Crisis closed the Suez Canal, forcing ships to travel around the South African Cape, adding more than 9,000 nautical miles to the journey. The crisis lasted a year, but again alerted the company to the changing nature of world politics and the need to build ever-larger ships. By the end of the decade, the BP Tanker Company numbered 146 vessels, including mammoth tankers of 42-, 50- and 60,000 dwt, with plans already being drawn up for 100,000 dwt tankers, which could hold more than 25 million gallons of crude oil.

In 1967, when the canal was again blocked, this time by the wreckage of sunken warships during the Six-Day War, BP's tankers were once more routed around the Cape. This challenge demanded bigger tankers, including the first of the very large crude carriers (VLCC), one of which was the *British Explorer*, which was launched in Japan, with a capacity of 215,000 dwt of cargo. By now, BP had struck oil in the »



EXPERIENCE MATTERS

Entering the BP Shipping headquarters at Sunbury-on-Thames, the history of the company is unavoidable. A model of one of the tankers from yesteryear sits in the main atrium, while memorabilia from the list of global destinations serviced by BP hang on the walls.

I put this to John Ridgway, who joined BP as a 16-year-old officer cadet in 1971. Thirty-seven years later, he is now chief executive of BP Shipping, while many of his fellow senior executives have also worked in the company for more than 35 years.

“Shipping is steeped in tradition, whether it is part of the language or the culture. We have a fantastic reputation for safety and professionalism that has been built up over many decades. BP Shipping has had a clear purpose for almost 100 years, to safely transport the oil and gas of the BP Group to its customers worldwide. We all need to play a part in continuing the traditions and continually improving what we do, as others have done for the past 95 years.”

Chief marine incident investigator Bob Fleming arrived at the same time as Ridgway, and served alongside seamen who experienced the war. “There is a sense of history within BP Shipping,” he says. “Yet, being a seafarer transcends nationalities and politics. You are a seaman first and foremost, governed by the laws of the oceans. But we must not forget the past, otherwise we cannot understand the journey of how we arrived at the company we are today.”

Indeed, BP Shipping seems to have as many ‘lifers’ in its ranks as other parts of the company. There are officers who have been serving more than 40 years. Ridgway adds: “We also have a vibrant pensioners club who keep in touch with colleagues long after they have left. At sea, you live, eat, work and play together. You learn each other’s strengths and weaknesses, and you learn tolerance. Colleagues become lifelong friends. At sea, it is very simple: you need to rely on every member of the team to succeed.”


The 95-year history of BP Shipping is part of the cultural history to which every employee can relate. “We are very proud of our unrivalled ethos of professionalism,” says Ridgway. It was instilled by those who worked for BP Shipping before us, and it is continued by those who work for her now as we continue to perform for the company.”

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Did you know?

- The Anglo-Persian Oil Company's first tanker was the *British Emperor*, which launched in 1916
- In 1983, BP Shipping transported just 500,000 tonnes of oil from the Middle East, compared with 140 million tonnes less than a decade earlier
- BP's Trader-class liquified gas carriers were the first to be ordered for general trading purposes rather than on a contract basis
- BP's first very large crude carrier was the 215,000 tonne *British Explorer*, built in 1969.



Vast vessel: the inside of the gas storage unit on the British Merchant, one third of BP's Trader-class fleet. It is a double hulled LNG tanker.

North Sea and was also exporting oil from Nigeria. It was soon to find oil in Alaska, further lessening its dependence on the Middle East.

The 1960s were a time of prosperity and expansion, but the economic bubble burst in 1973 when the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) caused the price of crude oil to increase from \$3 to \$12 overnight. The high prices at the pumps led to a drop in consumer demand. BP's maritime arm stopped building and began to shrink. A further oil crisis in 1979 pushed the price of crude from \$13 to a high of \$35 a barrel, which again caused new orders to be cancelled and condemned old ships to the breaker's yard.

In 1982, BP Shipping, as it was now known, was again drawn into the British military effort, this time the Falklands War in the South Atlantic. Eleven tankers were requisitioned from trade to provide fuel for warships to support the government effort.

Throughout the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, BP Shipping underwent a period of consolidation. At one stage, the company had just 22 BP ships. Yet, the *Exxon Valdez* incident of 1989, which heralded the building of ships with double hulls, had forced the company to grow more capability to actively manage marine risk.

In 1999, following merger with Amoco and the subsequent acquisition of ARCO, BP decided to embark on an ambitious

strategy of expansion that has resulted in the growth of its operated fleet to its current size of 54 ships, out of a total of more than 300 required daily for BP business. BP Shipping can boast one of the most modern and sophisticated fleets in the world. Even Sir Charles Greenway would might have been impressed. ■

Historic fleet: built in 1922, the *British Workman* (top) was one of the first 60 ships to be constructed for the British Tanker Company. Middle, the *British Courage* launched in 1928. Bottom, the *British Ruby* is one quarter of the new Gem-class LNG fleet.

